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Historic society celebrates milestone

Camas-Washougal group was formed three decades ago

By SCOTT HEWITT
Columbian staff writer

WASHOUGAL — The Port of Camas-Washougal wanted to develop the land that had once been Parkersville: a riverfront postage stamp that saw one of the first white settlements in the Pacific Northwest.

"Of course, we were appalled," said Bernice Pluchos. "We said, 'We've got to stop it.'"

That was in late 1978. Parker's Landing, the site of a small dock and estate in the mid-1800s, was already a National Historic Site thanks to the work of Pluchos and a handful of others; but it was the property of the port and its future was in question.

"There was no historical society," Pluchos said. "I said, 'There already is a good historical society, the Fort Vancouver one, and we could join that' — but people said no, we need one of our own."

Now, the Camas-Washougal Historical Society is preparing to mark its 30th anniversary. A celebration is set for 2 p.m. Saturday at the Camas Police community room, 2100 N.E. Third Ave.

There's plenty for the society to celebrate: The group has its own 2,500-square foot museum that's stuffed with historical artifacts, no mortgage hanging over it, dozens of dedicated volunteers and a new building project — a "carriage house" — under way next door.

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Bernice Pluchos, a founding member of the Camas-Washougal Historical Society, is stepping down as newsletter editor after 30 years.

It's also an occasion to reflect on the passage of time — because Pluchos, age 79, will step down as the historical group's quarterly newsletter editor after 30 years.

"Sometimes when we're older, we have to stop and say, 'We don't have all the answers,'" she said. "It's time for someone with a little more stamina and smarts to take over."

Which seems an awfully humble comment, because Pluchos' intelligence and energy are obvious during a quick guided tour of the Two Rivers Heritage Museum just across the street from the Pendleton Woolen Mills store.

Think of the museum as a bank vault crammed full of riches from the past. Once the historical society was set up, Pluchos said, donations from local folks started pouring in. At that time, the society was borrowing a room in the basement of the Camas library.

"It got really crowded down there," said Pluchos, who taught English at Washougal High School while also serving as the historical society's first president and a key member of its brain trust.

In 1996, the society purchased a former residence and shoe store. For the first couple of years after the group moved there, she said, folks would occasionally wander in seeming a little confused, wanting to try on footwear.

Today you can move from room to room in the museum and examine Chinook woven baskets and jewelry, handmade farm and logging equipment, doll collections, vintage musical instruments and gramophones, bedroom and sitting room furniture, kitchen and laundry equipment and an explosion of other historical gems — like the water pump that used to supply most of the town.

"Unless you were wealthy, you used the one pump in the middle of town," Pluchos said. Imagine, she said, early schoolteachers hauling students and buckets with them to go fetch water — and then the students lining up for drinks, sharing a common dipper.

The museum's newest feature is a genealogy room where folks can research their family histories. "It used to be a storage room," she said. "It's very exciting that people can come here and research themselves now."

Which is just what Pluchos said she'll spend some time doing now that she's produced her final Camas-Washougal Historical Society newsletter.

But she's not leaving the society, she said. She'll continue to volunteer, and she's excited to see the museum addition next door to its completion.

A passion for history is something Pluchos absorbed from her mother, who came from Oregon City — another key spot in the story of the Pacific Northwest — and who loved visiting historic sites and learning their stories.

"I guess I'm just plain interested in people," Pluchos said.

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